

Back Again, Back Again: Three Times Rhia Ran Away (And One Time She Didn't)

-

CW: this episode contains references to physical abuse, the death of a loved one, and mild descriptions of blood.

Abigail, as the voice on your preroll: Hello! Before we begin today's episode – which I'm so excited for – if the length of the episode doesn't give it away, I got a little carried away with this one – we've got a couple of listener limericks! If you, too, would like a funky little limerick written for you and read out on the show about an (arguably) pg-13 topic of your choice, you, too, can go to Ko-Fi.com/BackAgainPodcast or click the link in the description to jump directly to the page.

This first limerick is for my dear Chloe, regarding floor time – because it's required.

Floor time is good for your health

Equivalent to spiritual wealth

Back to the floor

When you're feeling poor

To arise as a much better self.

This second one is for ever stalwart Em, regarding plants:

Although on the streets they do fine

They die in my house all the time

Their standards are high

And I'm just some guy

Houseplants sure do love to whine.

Thank you both so much again for donating!! And – onto the episode. There’s a couple of content warnings for this one, so please check out the end of the episode description before listening. Stay safe.

[FX: voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is “Nightingales” by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro – Back Again, Back presents... Three Times Rhia Ran Away (And One Time She Didn’t).

[FX: Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Rhia was eleven when she first snuck out from the palace.

Eleven is a big age, even if no one talks of it as a milestone. At eleven, Rhia felt she knew more about the world than she did at seventeen. At eleven, she thought she could pluck the stars from the sky and swallow them whole.

At eleven, she fought with Cassian over something stupid – something borrowed without permission or stolen without repercussion, something said over dinner or in a lesson or whispered during what was meant to be private study in the library with the intention of casual cruelty. The fights were not new. They were both children *of the palace* in a way that was unique, even among the other children *of the palace* – children of soldiers or cooks or courtiers that took group lessons apart from the prince and the

teacher-in-training – and the two, because of their isolation, were raised more akin to siblings than simple friends. Fights were constant, and messy, and often felt irrevocably hurtful, in the moment. They never were. They both hated the other, a little bit, more than a little bit, in the way all siblings do when they are eleven and can pluck the stars from the sky, but the virulence only occasionally bobbed to the surface. Most of the time, it drowned in a begrudging but fiercely protective love.

This time, though whatever *thing* the fight had been over was lost to the annals of time, the way Rhia reacted to it was not. She was certain Cassian had started it, and she was certain she was justifiably bellicose in the way all siblings are when one sibling (or close-enough) pushes the other's buttons just one too many times. All of the small injustices Cassian had committed against her over the years, calling her names or barging into her room or stealing her coursework bubbled up, and up, and became a part of whatever this current fight was about.

She did remember this: she was in Cassian's bedroom. Her ears burned hot with anger. She punched him in the teeth.

Rhia had one glorious second of divine vengeance, Cassian, doubled over, hands clutching his mouth, before she realized what she'd done and how she hadn't actually wanted to hurt him, not like this, not this badly, but this was not an action that she could take back. His face crumpled; tears began; Rhia could not undo what she had done so instead she turned on her heel and ran through the palace, heart pounding, feeling sick and sick and sick. If she was selfless, she would have run to tell her teacher what she had done and find Cassian help. If she were brave, she would have told the kings – but Rhia was, in that moment, neither. She did not run *towards* the kings or her teacher – the one that taught

her and Cassian the language of the book, the closest thing to a mother than she had, who would have been the most understanding to the ways siblings fought, for she'd grown up beside the queen just as Rhia did the prince – but *from*, maybe *away*. Chest tight, hands shaking and her vision half-blurred from her own tears, she flew towards the stables, and out past the dozing stablehands, and out, and out, and out the back, into the woods, along the paths best illuminated by the stars.

It would have been cold, if she'd slowed down enough to notice. It would have been dark, a forest late at night, if she'd not been so distraught over what she'd done.

Unfortunately, being eleven, even when you felt powerful at eleven, meant that you were still at the mercy of your own actions and the punishments of adults. Being able to swallow the stars did not mean that they would not burn your throat on the way down.

She stumbled to a stop at the edge of a small village, situated somewhere between the end of the woods that surrounded the back of the palace and the the dregs of the metropolis that had dumped itself before the palace steps. She could not remember the last time she'd been on her own. She wasn't sure if she remembered the way back home. She wasn't sure, the image of Cassian, tears falling freely and blood on his fingers still burned into her brain, that she could bear to go home.

Maybe, Rhia thought to herself, finally starting to feel the cold, *I can live here now, for forever*. There was a friendly sort of glow casting flickering shadows along the small buildings, and Rhia followed them towards the village heart.

She hadn't even made it to the center before a small girl materialized at her side. She was a few shades lighter of a brown than Rhia, and her hair – almost the same shade of

brown as her skin and curly – was pulled up on to the top of her head in the sort of messy way that Rhia knew meant she'd done it herself after haughtily refusing the help of an adult.

She squinted at Rhia in the flickering half-shadow. Rhia, unsure, halted before her. For a terrible, horrible, second, she was certain the girl was going to say, *why did you punch the prince in the mouth?*, but instead, the other girl said – *you're not from here*.

Rhia blinked. How did the girl know? She'd lived in the palace the entire life and she didn't know all of the people there by name or face. And somehow the other girl just *knew*? About *her*?

She straightened. *Maybe I am*.

But you're not, said the girl smoothly. It wasn't an accusation. She almost sounded – amused. Intrigued.

Maybe i'm visiting someone who lives here. Maybe I'm the cousin of someone who lives here.

But you're not, the girl insisted again, and smiled in a way that was almost too clever for an eleven-year-old. Maybe while Rhia had been waiting to pluck the stars, this girl had been learning to steal them, instead.

I could be.

You're not, the girl repeated. *Because if you were, you'd be sitting with every other child in this village* – she spat the word *child*, as if she didn't include herself as part of the denomination, though Rhia was almost certain she was – *listening to my mothers act stories*.

Was *that* what was going on in the village center? Voices did play on the edge of her hearing, echoing around corners rachously and joyfully.

Rhia folded her arms. *Then why are you* – she said *you* in a way that, in no uncertain terms, marked this girl as part of the aforementioned *children* – *not listening, too?*

The girl rolled her eyes. *Because*, she began, the word *because* so exaggerated that it, in no uncertain terms, marked Rhia as a *fool* – *I live with them. I can recite this story word for word. It's boring.* She held up a finger, cocked her head to listen, and then said, in perfect cadence and pitch with the echoes from round the corner, *I will never go with you, foul beast! I will fight against you till my very last!*

Rhia stood, shocked. The girl shrugged. *I did not say they were clever storytellers. I just said they acted stories.*

So you wander around in the dark instead?

The girl sighed. *I was looking for something more interesting to do.* She said *was* in a way that, in no uncertain terms, told Rhia she'd found it. *Where are you from, girl-at-the-edge-of-the-dark?*

My name is Rhia, she said. Her stomach twisted in a way that made her nearly throw up at this girl's feet when she thought of the palace, and then her not-quite-sibling, and the reason she'd run away in the first place. Suddenly, she wanted to apologize to Cassian, even if it meant he punched her in the teeth back. Could he forgive her, for this one? She hoped so. He'd done worse things to her. She'd do worse things back, before they were both grown up. She just didn't know that she could face the kings and her teacher. *I'm from – I'm from.* She swallowed. *My name is Rhia. I ran away from my house.*

The girl squinted into the darkness behind her. *Without your parents?*

I don't have parents, stupid, Rhia snapped.

The girl huffed, *Everyone has parents. Just because you ran away doesn't mean you don't have parents.*

No, Rhia insisted. *Not me. I'm the teacher to the eligida-to-come. I don't have parents. I have guardians and teachers.*

The girl went very, very still. She seemed to notice, for the first time, Rhia's frilly dress and slippers. *Oh*, she said, very carefully. *Ah. Well. If you've never had parents before, you won't think mine are strange. I think they'd like to meet you.* Then she grinned, almost deviously, up at Rhia. *My name is Iolo, you know. It is nice to meet you, Rhia.*

–

Iolo seemed to take great pleasure in interrupting the performance of her mothers. She barged into the middle of the circle the children sat in, dragging Rhia by the sleeve, and announced, gleefully, *this story has to stop, right now! I've found a lost girl!*

One of her mothers, who was down on her hands and knees pretending to be some sort of animal, sat back onto her ankles, looking more than a little put out. Iolo's other mother, who had been brandishing a very large stick like a sword, dropped it to the ground, coming over and falling to a knee beside Rhia. She was impressively tall, this woman, towering over Rhia when on her feet – who, even at eleven, was heads and tails taller than Cassian and was fast creeping up on passing her teacher – but she had a kind face and gentle eyes. *Iolo*, she called, her voice low and smooth, *go home and bring back a blanket. She's frozen through.*

Iolo jutted out her lower lip, then opened her mouth wide as if she were about to make another proclamation, but her first mother, sat back on her heels, made a warning

humming sound that had obviously occurred enough that Iolo snapped her mouth shut and trotted towards a small house at the far edge of the fire.

What is your name? Asked the other mother, the one before Rhia, burying Rhia's cold hands in her big ones. *Are you truly lost, or is our child putting on her own performance?*

Rhia squirmed, unsure how to answer about whether or not she were *truly* lost. On the one hand — yes. On the other — she thought she might want to stay lost a little longer, if it meant the kings' anger at her punching Cassian turned, instead, to a mild panic at her absence that would make them far more likely to forgive her. She hadn't been hugged by either of them for quite some time. She could almost imagine it, though, them leaping down from their horses and wrapping her in their arms. *We'd been so scared*, the king would say, and he'd swing her around like he'd done to her and Cassian when they were young. *We're just glad you're alright*, the queen would say, and smooth down her hair to kiss her forehead.

Those were daydreams — of that, she was certain. But she could almost — almost — picture them coming true. *I'm not lost*, Rhia insisted. The second mother shot her a look.

Then where are you from, wandering around in the dark and the cold like this? Where are your parents?

Always this question, Rhia thought, a spark of annoyance and a spark of shame stinging in her gut. Had this second mother seen her daydreams about not-quite-parents in her eyes? Was that what this is about?

She doesn't have parents, Iolo announced grandly, nearly tripping over the giant patchwork blanket she'd gathered in her arms. When she said it, it didn't sound sad or defiant. It sounded like something that made Rhia interesting.

The second mother's brow furrowed, and she gave Rhia a second pass. Her eyes caught, too – on her dress, not meant for doing work in, on her shoes, wrong for the weather wrong for the woods, on her hair, which hung long and unbound and unsuited for work. Rhia knew she was a creature valued for her intellect, even at eleven. She understood, more in feelings than words, that she was also a creature valued for the power and the wealth she represented. *Look what we have made. Look what we can maintain.* All at once, the pieces — or something close to the correct pieces — seemed to come together in the Other Mother's mind, and she stood abruptly. *That's it,* she said, and caught the gaze of the first mother with a nod.

First Mother took up the call. *All of you, to bed, to home, now. If I hear from your parents that you didn't go straight home, next time, I will drag you by the scruff myself.*

The children groaned and laughed and did as they were told, clambering up and taking off in different directions. Iolo dumped the blanket on top of Rhia's head, having to throw it a bit to make it land, and Rhia fumbled blindly in the dark until the mothers took pity on her and helped her find her way out again. Iolo shot her a slick grin. The first mother tugged on her ear. Iolo yelped and tried to look more respectable.

Us too, I think, hummed Second Mother. *To home. And for you —* this was said towards her daughter — *to bed. This can be sorted out much better indoors and away from this wind.*

—

Inside was cozy and, save for the sleeping loft above, about as big as Rhia's bedroom back home (*home*). The mothers put on a kettle and made them all tea, then sat Rhia down

at the table as Iolo hovered near the ladder up to the sleeping loft, trying to make it seem like she was actually about to go to bed.

Rhia explained, as eloquently as she could, her role at the palace, her place with the kings, and the path she'd taken to get to the village. When they prodded her as to *why* she'd left (*did they hurt you? Did something happen to the palace? Is everyone safe?*) Rhia squirmed and squirmed and squirmed until she finally blurted, shame burning her ears, *I punched the prince in the mouth.*

Iolo, who was still hovering, let out a large, cackling laugh. First Mother turned around sharply in her chair and hissed at her daughter, *if you are not asleep by the time I count to five, I will write you a list of chores so long you won't see your friends for a week.* The girl squeaked, turning red, and practically *leapt* up the ladder, bounding up the rungs and throwing herself onto the heap of blankets. First Mother watched for a silent count of ten, twenty, making sure her daughter's face did not reappear, then turned back to face Rhia. Out of the corner of her eye, Rhia watched Iolo slide around and peek over the edge. *Shhhh*, she mouthed, and stuck out her tongue. Rhia, for some reason, had to resist a blush. She turned back to the mothers.

First Mother had gone a bit green. Rhia couldn't be sure, but it almost looked as if Second Mother was trying to swallow back a grin that would have matched her daughter's. *Well*, managed First Mother, finally. *That is quite a predicament.*

Second Mother, without hesitation and without any cloying notes of pity, asked, *will they hurt you when you go back?*

Rhia clenched her teeth so hard together she thought they might crack. *I don't –*

Would they? *Would they?* She and Cassian had both been hit before. They had been stupid, made bad decisions, embarrassed the kings in front of dignitaries or the court or were too loud or too opinionated – especially Rhia, especially Rhia. She was starting to become more and more aware of the slight but important differences between herself and Cassian. She was starting to understand what it meant to be *special* but not *royal*.

Mostly it meant lonely. Mostly it meant that even if you were eleven and could swallow the stars whole, eleven still meant you were at the mercy of adults.

She'd deserved it. When she had been, before. At eleven, Rhia didn't doubt this.

She wouldn't've mind if Cassian hit her back. That felt fair. That felt even. That felt like a resolution to a fight between not-quite-siblings. That was the only way for such a thing to end without insidious resentment seeping in seeping in to their relationship.

If they hit her back, instead of Cassian, that wasn't making things even. That was a punishment.

I hit the prince. What happens – is only fair.

Second Mother's mouth opened, lip curling, a second away from snarling something. First Mother, still green, put a hand on her arm. She shot a look at Rhia, and then a second one at her wife. *Watch your words, dear.* She turned back to Rhia. *You are welcome to stay the night. It isn't safe to go out into the dark again. We will talk again in the morning. About – how to get you home. Or – if you would like to stay here.*

None of this was right. Rhia's stomach twisted, but she had been raised to be polite and to not question when adults gave her directions, so she finished her tea and accepted the clothing she was offered to change into for sleep and climbed to the loft to lay down

where Iolo was certainly, definitely not asleep. Rhia flopped down, back to the girl, and pretended not to feel when Iolo rolled over and kicked her. *Hey.*

Downstairs, the mothers whispered in harried but hushed tones. *I will not* – Second Mother snapped, voice rising, before her wife *shh'ed* her and they both fell back into quiet debate.

Iolo kicked her again, and when Rhia didn't respond, shutting her eyes tight and pulling her quilt up around her ears, Iolo poked and poked and poked at her back until she finally rolled over.

What? Rhia snapped. She was worried about tomorrow and was worried about the way the mothers were talking, because it was most certainly about *her*.

Hey, Iolo said again, still grinning sharply. Her eyes sparkled, almost as if she were – pleased. *Are you coming to stay with us?*

No, Rhia ground out, then hesitated. *I – I don't know.*

You should. Everyone else here is boring. You'd be more fun to talk to.

Rhia ignored the very different way that turned her stomach over. *I can't, though. I have a job to do,* she finally said. *I was chosen for something important. It wouldn't be right for me to disappear. It wouldn't be fair to my teacher – or the kings.*

It was the right thing to say. It was the way Rhia had been raised to think. But she couldn't help but let herself imagine, for just a second, what that could be like.

Late that night, there came a knock on the door. Rhia pulled herself out of a warm, bleary sleep and stared through half-lidded eyes down towards the doorway to see Second Mother talking to two figures, mostly blocked, in the doorway. When she turned over her

shoulder to glance up the loft, where Iolo and First Mother still slept beside her, Rhia finally realized who they were.

Her teacher, dressed for travel, a hand firm on the much smaller shoulder of –
Cassian.

He stared plaintively up towards her in the loft. If she squinted, his mouth looked a bit swollen, but – he didn't look angry. And the kings were nowhere to be seen.

She finally registered that all three of them were looking at her, so she unwrapped herself from the blankets, shivering from the cold, and came to join them down on the floor. She hesitated before them, unsure of where to go, until Cassian broke forward, slamming into her and wrapping her into a hug. *I was so worried about you*, he said, squeezing tight. *Why did you run?*

The words, now that he was here, nearly stuck in her throat. *I'm sorry*, Rhia managed. And then the dam had broken, and they poured out, and out, and out. *I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry* –

His hug stiffened, just a little bit. Then her teacher was kneeling beside the both of them, and tucked each of their hair behind their ears and cupped her hands on each of their cheeks. *It's important that you forgive each other. You will face much in this life, and it will be easier if you do not forget to lean on the other.*

Rhia's stomach flipped. Cassian turned to her and said, without hesitation, *I forgive you.*

He was always better at letting go than she was. At least, when they were young. She didn't know what to say to that, so pulled him back into another hug.

Second Mother still looked on with sharp eyes. To Rhia, she said, *you still do not have to leave. If you are afraid of what they will do.*

Her teacher did not get upset at this. She was always better at staying calm than the rest of them. *The kings do not and will not know. She is safe, with us.*

She nearly sagged in relief at that, barely hearing as her teacher reminded her to thank her host.

Gratinoc, she managed, and gave her very best bow. *Tell your daughter goodbye from me, please.*

–

You didn't tell them? Rhia finally asked, in the language of the book, after she and Cassian had climbed into the back of the discreet service cart among bags of grain and salt and settled in, wrapped together in a shared blanket as they were jostled back towards the palace. On the cart bench, their teacher sang quietly to herself, an old Rhysean song that Rhia could almost trick herself into remembering from when she was a baby and still had parents. *Them*, she didn't have to clarify, meant *the kings*.

Cassian ducked his head. He smiled, a little shyly, and Rhia noticed with a start that he'd lost one of his teeth. Shame reignited in her chest, spreading to her face spreading to her ears, before he seemed to notice and shook his hair in front of his face. *It was loose*, he said instead. *The tooth. I'd been too scared to pull it out.* Silence. And then, *I almost did. Tell them. But It's like the Menstrana said. We have to protect each other. Before anything else.*

Before anything else, Rhia had agreed, and ducked closer to him to stare up at the stars. *Before anything else.*

–

Rhia was fourteen the second time she ran away from the palace.

Before anything else had lasted for two years, fighting kept to a minimum as it became the world against Cassian and Rhia. They learned how to climb out onto the roof without getting caught and kept a map of the night sky they'd bullied one of the castle scribes into making on Cassian's wall, thick dark lines drawn between different stars to make constellations just their own. Even though Rhia was no longer allowed to speak at dinners when matters of state were being discussed, Cassian listened to her thoughts when they were alone and shared them in her place the following night. She pretended not to care when Cassian was gradually, gradually pulled from lessons on language and literature with her and instead routed down into the arena, where he trained with Hildegarde, the Captain of the Guard, a woman of few words and high expectations. She wasn't particularly fond of Rhia (though Rhia wasn't particularly fond of her), and called her a *nuisance* and *distraction* when Rhia was just far enough away for Hildegarde to gain plausible deniability at being out of earshot. They were harsher words for the few she spoke.

That was fine. That was fine. She'd heard him, stronger now for being a prince and so confidently *himself*, say back, *she's my sister. She's not distracting me from anything*. And that was enough. Hildegarde was part of the *everything else*, part of the thing they were meant to be united against.

And then her teacher died.

It was sudden. Rhia did not get a goodbye or a warning or a burial day. She came to the library one day, did her lessons and walked Cassian to the arena as usual and came back for more lessons and more studying, then the next – she and Cassian walked into the

library, and Hildegarde was waiting in place of her teacher. She pointed to Cassian and snapped her fingers. *You are mine now. Come.*

What about lessons? Rhia asked, annoyed at how much her voice pitched up at the end of the sentence. *Where is the menstrana?* She would not approve this. She lectured to them both about the importance of history, of stories, of love. She did not think people were meant for war and nothing else.

Hildegarde did not pause as she continued her sweep towards the door, catching Cassian by the shoulder and pulling him along. *Your teacher is dead.*

She slammed the door behind her, shaking the shelves of the library, and the space echoed like it never had when there were still two bodies to fill it.

Rhia had been taught two languages and a thousand years of history and enough poetry to regale a court for a fortnight straight. She had never been taught how to grieve. So even though every part of her ached with this, pain so great it nearly sent her to her knees, clutching at the desk nearest her, she could not lay out the process in a neat ten steps and so did not ever begin at all.

That was the second night Rhia ran away.

Where to go, when the last time you left the palace you were eleven years old? The same place, if you are a creature of habit, if you are a creature searching for some semblance of comfort or consistency or home when one of two people in the world who loved you without condition or expectation were dead. The same place, if those two people had not betrayed you the first time and your three-year-old escape route still lay intact. The same place, if you somehow managed to find your way back to the village you'd visited not

by the path you'd stumbled through in the woods but by the hypnagogic cart ride you'd taken back with those same two people.

Rhia did not quite realize where she was until she was on her knees and the door was swinging open before her.

Iolo had grown. Her hair was longer, the curls pulled looser by the weight of them all. She'd gotten thinner – Rhia remembered with a start the drought, the disaffected conversations between the kings during the hottest weeks anyone alive remembered. The queen – *The livestock are dying. It's getting harder to source meat.* The king's response – *add another lottery to make up the deficit. Pull from one of the towns. Someone will be honored to feed us.*

It was the cooler days, now. They'd passed the longest day of the year. Rain came steadily once more. But it was clear that while she'd nearly forgotten the struggle, with her plate never empty and her washbasin always full, Iolo's body had not.

Iolo's hand curved into a claw around the doorframe. *You.*

I didn't know where else to go.

Why didn't you stay?

It wasn't the question she'd been expecting. *I had family. I had duties to attend to.*

Her fingertips were losing their color, she was pressing so hard at the door. It was an odd thing to pick out, among the thudding ache in her chest, but she couldn't stop staring. *And now?*

I still have duties, Rhia said, hesitating for only a second.

That was enough. A flash of something like grief stumbled across Iolo's face, and she softened. Iolo offered her a hand to help her to her feet. *Stay until they call for you, then.*

Inside, she was greeted after only a second of confusion by a noticeably older First Mother. Like her daughter, the three years had not been kind to her. Her wife was not inside.

Iolo took her out the back door and into their garden. There, a small, wizened sapling twisted and fought for life.

It did not take Rhia long to understand. *Who you lost*, Iolo said. Her voice shook. *They are not gone. They are in the ground. They are in the trees. They are in the earth and air and sky. They are the magic and they are the mundane and they have been made anew.* She swallowed, hard. *They are not gone. They are not gone.*

She turned and went back inside. Rhia stayed, staring at the place one of Iolo's mothers had been laid to rest, and finally began to cry.

It would be two days before she returned back to the castle. The first night, she couldn't sleep, staring over the edge of the loft towards the door, wishing that, like three years before, a knock would come to bring her home. As the night grew longer, she held out hope for Cassian – that he would not forget the promise they'd made to their teacher on the day of her death *The two of us against the world. The two of us against the world.*

Cassian did not come. And Rhia did not allow herself to miss that, too.

–

Rhia did not run away, the rest of her fourteenth and fifteenth years, but she did an awful lot of leaving. She did not run, but she traded the palace for nights with Iolo, near-dawns with Iolo, helping her mother (Madrugada, she learned, was the name of the woman she'd long referred to as First Mother) with the cooking, the animals, the upkeep on the house. She did not run but reached out to catch story nights, where Rhia took part in the plays for the children, and as Iolo leaned against the shadowed houses, rolling her eyes, she

was able to pretend that there was not another life that she was running from. There was a slight but important difference between *running away* and *running from*, and Rhia took every opportunity to tell herself that she was *running from*. The difference was – *running from* implied an eventual return. Just – while she was away, there was no isolation, no broken vows, no Cassian no Hildegard no rest of Cassian's friends, the boy named Tavius who'd inserted himself by Cassian's side and the girl who seemed to make it a game to say less than Hildegard. No kings. Just this – goats. Birds. A girl with sparks in her eyes and sharp teeth and a low and raspy voice. Shows. The village children she sword-fought with sticks and a surrogate mother and Iolo, on the night of Rhia's fifteenth birthday, pulling her back before they stepped into the firelight and kissing her more softly than she'd ever thought she deserved.

She'd floated high on that kiss, let Iolo delay and delay and delay her return until dawn, past dawn, at which point Madrugada and Iolo surprised her with small honey cakes and jam and kissed her forehead to wish her many happy returns. Rhia wandered back to the palace, long since having perfected moving through the trail in the woods, and scaled the trellis up to her room.

Cassian was waiting for her, legs folded beneath him as he sat on her bed. In his hands, he held a lumpy but painstakingly wrapped package. Rhia froze when she saw him, unsure of how he would react, but he wasn't angry. Maybe a little sad. Maybe a little distant. Rhia couldn't remember the last time they'd been alone. Before their teacher had died. Before everything had fallen apart.

Happy birthday, he said, proffering the gift. *I was here at midnight, but –*

I was celebrating. Maybe her heart hurt, a little bit, at those two simple words, but he was the one that had left first. He did not deserve her pity, not on a day like this where the taste of honey still sat thick on her tongue. *With my friends.*

What friends? Rhia did not think Cassian meant to sound as dismissive as he did, but she still flinched. He opened his mouth, lips just starting to form a *sorry*, before it snapped shut again. He cleared his throat. *I meant, what people do you know outside the palace?*

Just some people, Rhia said, trying to sound nonchalant, heart suddenly beating fast at the thought of having broken some unknown rule. She'd never been expressly forbidden from leaving as she did, but the kings had a bad habit of retroactive proclamations. She and Cassian, back when they were young, had both been on the receiving end of consequences created from them often enough to recognize the habit. She did not know how much Hildegarde had made him forget of that childhood and whether or not *us against the world* still applied – he was more *prince*, less *brother*, every time she saw him. It wasn't just the way he carried himself or the newly forged sword – a year early, tradition was sixteen – that hung by his side. It was the things he said. It was the very makeup of his brain.

Well. Fifteen is a big age. I'm glad you were celebrating. He thrust the package out towards her. *Speaking of. This is for you. Hildegarde says everyone should be able to defend themselves. I know you don't know how to fight with a sword, so –* he shrugged. *I had it made for you.*

Rhia unwrapped the package. It was a dagger, beautifully made, the blade engraved with stars. She searched, for just a moment, along the blade for the constellations she and Cassian had made at twelve.

They were not there. The stars were randomly affixed in their positions.

Thank you, Rhia said blandly, falling back on drilled politeness. As everything with Cassian these days, it shouldn't've hurt when things were not as they used to be. But all the same.

He stood. *Sorry to go. I have training. Many happy returns.*

And she was alone again. Without hesitation, Rhia set the dagger on her desk and climbed back out the window.

–

Rhia was sixteen and a half when she began to run *towards* instead of *from* palace life.

Iolo had gotten a job serving nights at a tavern nearby. Rhia liked to visit, to tease her and leave tips at her other tables (she refused, even during bad times, anything akin to charity – no money, no food stolen from the palace kitchens, no clothing that Rhia, taller and broader than Iolo by no small amount, had outgrown, but Rhia had gotten cleverer about leaving these gift behind with time). She loved the music – both the hired bards and the ones that showed up uninvited and played unprompted. She loved being around this many people that were not stuffy or focused on hierarchy. She loved, even as much as she complained about it, the cheap beer that Iolo snuck her in her free moments. At sixteen, she especially loved the name of the tavern – at least, the name as Rhia interpreted it. *We choose our own destiny.*

Here, she met the *fretim* for the first time. Iolo caught her around the waist one night as she was leaving, a tray perfectly balanced in her free hand, and murmured into her ear. *Be back tomorrow night. There's someone for you to meet.*

Rhia's heart had skipped a beat, and she'd nodded. The next evening, at her usual table, a girl that couldn't've been any older than she was sat with two friends, weapons on the table and determination in their eyes. There was something compelling about the girl – the way she sat. The small row of braids that curled around her left ear. The sharp angles created by where she'd pulled her wavy hair away from her face.

She tapped the edge of her twin swords as Rhia sat down and grinned. *I have an offer to make you, menstrana de eligida. My name is Callia.*

[FX: The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Back Again, Back Again, is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're thinking November is an awfully long time away, keep on stopping by on the first of every month for a bonus episode – or check us out on Instagram and Tumblr @BackAgainPodcast or on Tik Tok @AbigailElizaWrites – I'm going absolutely nowhere. If you feel so inclined, you can donate to Back Again, Back Again on KoFi at [Ko-Fi.com/BackAgainPodcast](https://ko-fi.com/BackAgainPodcast), or click the link in the description, where, if you leave an arguably PG-13 topic in the description box, I'll write you a terrible little limerick in return. Of course, you'll also win my eternal affection and gratitude.

Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from [FreeMusicArchive.org](https://freemusicarchive.org). Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. I'm so proud of you for making it through your worst days and finding happiness where you can. The light-soaked days are coming. You are loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.